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שטרַאַלנדיקער זשאַרגאָן

# Radiant Jargon



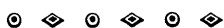
Six Poems About Yiddish



שטראַלנדיקער זשאַרגאָן

## **Radiant Jargon**

Six Poems About Yiddish



Poems by

Maia Evrona, Arkady Gendler, Jacob Glatstein,  
Morris Winchevsky, and Michael Yashinsky

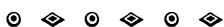
Translations by

Miranda Cooper, Richard Fein, Adah Hetko,  
and Sophia Shoulson

Edited by David Mazower, Madeleine Cohen,  
and Sophia Shoulson

A Yiddish Book Center Translation





„איר וויסט וואָס איז אַזוינס ייִדיש? איר האָט כאָטש אַ  
באַגריף, וואָס פֿאַר אַ ווונדערלעך לשון דאָס איז?“

“Do you know what this Yiddish is? Have you any  
notion what a wonderful language it is?”

– Jacob Glatstein,  
*(Homecoming at Twilight)*





## Foreword

As clay is to the potter, or wood to the violin-maker, so language – its letters, words, visual properties, sounds and soul – is the essential raw material of the poet. This is true of all poets, of course, indeed all writers, but none more so than Yiddish poets, who have shown a deep and abiding love for the Yiddish language. The result of this passionate attachment is an astonishing legacy: hundreds upon hundreds of Yiddish poems about *mame-loshn*, the mother tongue.

This slender volume offers a *forshpayz* – an appetizer – from this feast of Yiddish creativity. In *Zhargon*, the socialist intellectual Morris Winchevsky takes on and takes down a bigot who mocks him for writing poetry in the ‘jargon.’ At least a century separates Winchevsky’s tongue in cheek satire from Michael Yashinsky’s *Loshn-libe* – a poem with a very different sort of tongue action in which student and language bond like a pair of Almodovar-style Latin lovers. In addition, we have a folk ditty probably used to teach children the *alef-beys*, a coiled spring of a poem by the poet and translator Maia Evrona, one of Jacob Glatstein’s defiant and heartfelt poems about Yiddish, plus a YouTube hit – *Zingt af yidish* (Sing in Yiddish) by the Bessarabian troubadour Arkady Gendler (ז"ל).

It gives us particular pleasure to note that no fewer than four current or former Yiddish Book Center graduate and translation fellows are represented in this selection. They have demonstrated the same inventiveness and love of Yiddish as the poets and translators who preceded them. In so doing, they provide ample proof that this particular seam of Yiddish poetic creativity has many nuggets still to yield.

– David Mazower

*Yiddish Book Center Bibliographer and Editorial Director*

## Hidden Yiddish

Yiddish and English by Maia Evrona

### Hidden Yiddish

Perhaps there is memory growing out of oblivion,  
a miracle happening on a journey,  
as the nightingale sings an aching soliloquy  
buried in the forests of Poland.



Poet and translator Maia Evrona describes this English-language poem as being “built around Yiddish words” in such a way that she has often thought of it as a Yiddish poem. The poet’s self-translation into Yiddish reveals the hidden Yiddish wordplay behind the English poem. It also reveals wordplay that can only be seen when reading between Yiddish and English, as with *soliloquy* and *solovey* (nightingale). And perhaps just as interestingly, it shows moments when the two languages use completely different words to express one meaning: Poland in English, but *Lite* (Lithuania) in Yiddish. So which came first, the Yiddish or the English? Is reading the Yiddish of this poem like having a magician tell you the secret behind a magic trick?

## באַהאַלטענע יודיש

אפֿשר דערמאָנונג וואַקסט אַרויס פֿונעם מאָן  
אפֿשר אַ נס געשעט אויף אַ נסיעה  
בשעת דער סאַלאָוויי זינגט זיך אַ מאַנאַלאָג פֿון ווייען  
באַערדיקט אין אַ וואַלד אין ליטע.

*The Alef-Beys*

(Folklore), translated by Sophia Shoulson

*The Alef-Beys*

א – *Alef* – A girl

ב – *Beys* – a Bad girl

ג – *Giml* – a Good girl

ד – *Dalet* – a Delicate girl

ה – *Hey* – a Haughty girl

ו – *Vov* – a Vibrant girl

ז – *Zayen* – a Zweet girl

ח – *Khes* – a girl with *Khey*n

ט – *Tes* – a Treasured girl

י – *Yud* – a Yiddish girl



We came across this poem in Miriam Hoffman’s book, *A Key to Yiddish*, where it is credited to “the Yiddish folklore tradition.” The poem serves as a mnemonic to help children remember the names of the first ten letters of the *alef-beys*, as well as the sounds made by those letters. Our decision to honor the mnemonic and follow the phonetic sounds of the *alef-beys* in the translation presented us with an interesting challenge—some of the resulting phrases are certainly “zweeter” than others!

## דער אַלף-בית

א	אַלף	אַ מיידל
ב	בית	אַ ביזן מיידל
ג	גימל	אַ גוט מיידל
ד	דלת	אַ דאַר מיידל
ה	היי	אַ הויך מיידל
ו	וואָו	אַ ווויל מיידל
ז	זין	אַ זיס מיידל
ח	חית	אַ חנעוודיק מיידל
ט	טית	אַ טינער מיידל
י	יוד	אַ יודיש מיידל

## Sing in Yiddish

By Arkady Gendler, translated by Adah Hetko

### Sing in Yiddish

With a fiddle, with our voices  
Newborn Yiddish song rejoices,  
*Mame-loshn uvah*, what a pleasure.  
Soulful playing klezmer mavens  
Satisfying ancient cravin's  
Mix in fresh-hot tunes with well-loved treasures.  
Blasting songs that lay in attics  
Now bewitching new fanatics,  
Holding hands and dancing by in throngs.  
Yiddish rhymes that dance like lovers  
Yiddish tunes that softly hover  
Sing together: chiribiribom

Refrain:

Chiribim, chiribom,  
Everybody sing together,  
Chiribim, chiribom,  
Not embarrassed whatsoever,  
Chiribim, chiribom,  
Chiri-bim-bom-bim-bom-bom

Shabbos after making kiddush,  
Everyone sings songs in Yiddish,  
Songs that some remember from the cradle  
And tenderly those wise old-timers  
Croon to babes with pacifiers  
Linking generations 'round the table.  
At every stage of life and being  
Yiddish song takes on new meaning,

## זינגט אויף ייִדיש

מיט אַ פֿידל, אָן אַ פֿידל,  
ווידער קלינגט אַ ייִדיש לידל,  
מאַמע-לשון - ס'איז דאָך אַ מחיה.  
כלי-זמר - היינטיקע חכמים  
שפּילן ייִדישע ניגונים,  
צווישן אַלטע לידער שפּילט מען נײַע.  
כאָטש אויף ייִדיש לאַנג געשוויגן,  
זינגען מיר מיט פֿאַרגעניגן,  
מ'גייט דערבײַ אַ טענצל מלא-טעם.  
טאַמער פֿעלט אַ גראַם צום לידל,  
צי אַ סטרונע בײַ דעם פֿידל,  
זינגט מען אונטער: טשירי-בירי-באַם.

### רעפֿרען:

טשירי-בים, טשירי-באַם,  
זינגט באַזונדער צי אין איינעם,  
טשירי-בים, טשירי-באַם,  
און פֿאַר קיינעם זיך ניט שעמען,  
טשירי-בים, טשירי-באַם,  
טשירי-בים-באַם-בים-באַם-באַם.

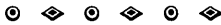
נאָך דעם שבתדיקן קידוש,  
זינגט מען זמירות אויך אויף ייִדיש,  
ס'זינגען מיט אַפֿילו די רבנים.  
זאָלן אַלע יידן וויסן:  
סײַ אויף חתונות און בריתן,  
ייִדיש זינגען אַלע מחותנים.  
אויף קאַנצערטן, פֿעסטיוואַלן,  
פֿליסן נײַע, פֿרישע קוואַלן,

Marking every stage of life's transition.  
Even concert halls and barrooms,  
Yiddish seminars and classrooms,  
Resonate with Yiddish song tradition.

Refrain...

Yiddish song will keep on moving,  
Radiant and ever-blooming,  
Bearing fruit in each place it progresses.  
And as it wends its way through cities,  
Spoken, read and sung in ditties,  
Yiddishland finds many home addresses:  
In Paris, Tel-Aviv and Moscow,  
Montreal and San Francisco,  
L.A., Melbourne and Yerushalayim,  
New York, London, and Odessa,  
Amherst, Tokyo and Vilna,  
Raise your glass, to Yiddish: a *lekhayim!*

Refrain...



**In “Zingt af yidish,” Arkady Gendler celebrates renewed interest in Yiddish language and music, and the potential for Yiddish song to unite Jews of all nationalities and across generations. As a mentor and inspiration to younger Yiddishists and musicians all over the world, Gendler fulfilled his own vision of this potential over the course of his career. The translator chose to maintain the meter and rhyme scheme of the original, even while reordering content and updating the language, so that it's ready to be sung aloud. This singable translation honors Gendler's vision of Yiddish song in a continual process of joyous rebirth.**



יונג און אַלטע אין איינעם זינגען לידער.  
חנה, זלמן, רייזל, איציק,  
משה, לייבל מיטן סמיטשיק,  
אַלע שוועסטער, אַלע זינגען ברידער.

רעפֿרען...

ידיש ווידער ווערט געבוירן,  
ס'איז דער שורש ניט פֿאַרלוירן,  
ס'פֿייער אויפֿן פריפעטשיק ניט פֿאַרלאָשן.  
יידן זינגען איין משפּחה,  
שיקן אומעטום אַ ברכה,  
מ'רעדט, מ'שריבט, מ'זינגט אויף מאַמע-לשון,  
מאָסקווע, פעטערבורג און קיעוו,  
זאַפּאַראָזשיע, תּל-אַבֿיבֿ,  
כּרים, אָדעס, ניו-יאָרק, ירושלים,  
סאַן-פּראַנציסקאָ און בערדיטשעוו,  
יעדע שטאָט און יעדער יישובֿ,  
מאָכן דאָרט אויף ידיש אַ לחיים.

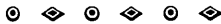
רעפֿרען...

## My Tent

By Jacob Glatstein, translated by Richard Fein

### My Tent

Embrace me with choking devotion,  
language mine, like a jealous wife;  
confine me to my tent;  
let the world never grasp what I meant,  
even in the best translation.  
Let them exclude me,  
diminish me, disparage me.  
I don't care if I'm not in their number.  
Summon me, irrevocably,  
to your destiny.  
Let no one coax me from your arms.  
Take my word. I don't want to be universal.  
When I take my leave  
I will become a pillar of cloud,  
a gleam of light,  
above our small sanctuary.



Over many decades, Jacob Glatstein's verse returned again and again to the conflicting emotions of being a Yiddish poet in America. Offset against the ambivalence and frustration of creating in an ever-constricting climate was his total dedication to Yiddish and to his craft, a kind of bet on posterity. This predicament—linguistic, cultural, and existential—was the crucible for some of Glatstein's finest poems, including "My Tent".

Glatstein has attracted many fine translators, but none, surely, more fitting than Richard Fein, a distinguished poet and literary scholar. Fein learned Yiddish as an adult and has written movingly and extensively about his encounter with Yiddish and Yiddish poetry. He describes translation as "lust—a way of possessing the Yiddish poem—of being more intimate with its letters and words." He continues: "I have at times entertained the illusion that I am a Yiddish poet who, as it happens, writes in English".

## מנין געצעלט

נעם מיך אַרום מיט ווערגנדיקער געטרישאַפֿט,  
לשון מנינס, ווער מיר אַן אייפֿערזיכטיק ווייב,  
בינד מיך צו צום געצעלט,  
לאַז מיך ווערן שטום-לשון פֿאַר דער וועלט,  
אַפֿילו אין דער בעסטער איבערזעצונג.  
זאָלן זיי מיך פֿאַרטיילן.  
פֿאַרקליין מיך, ביז ניט-דערשעצונג,  
מיך אַרט נישט אַז זיי וועלן מיך נישט ציילן.  
פֿאַרשווער מיך, אַ געטרייען,  
צו דיר מיט גורלדיקער באַשערטקייט,  
אַז ס'זאָל מיך קיינער פֿון דינע אַרעמס נישט באַפֿרייען.  
אמת, איך וועל נישט זיין אוניווערסאַל,  
אַבער אַז איך וועל אַוועק,  
וועל איך ווערן אַ וואַלקן-זיפל,  
אַ ליכט-שטראַל,  
איבער אונדזער קליינעם מישפּן.

“Jargon”

By Morris Winchevsky, translated by Miranda Cooper

“Jargon”

Here stands a man, who hears my poem  
And grins while he listens along;  
His face says: How did it come to be  
That a Jew can scribble a song?

He thinks that poetry in jargon  
Is naught but fantasy.  
“How comes the language of Smargon  
— asks he — to Poetry?”

I answer him: a person can be  
A writer in jargon like me,  
Just as a dummy can surely grin  
in a refined and polished Latin.

I tell him also: Personally  
I love this language too:  
So can, perhaps, with difficulty,  
An overconfident fool...



As this poem shows, a commitment to the Yiddish language and literature was as important to Winchevsky and his colleagues as their commitment to workers' struggles. “Jargon” was once a common — sometimes derogatory — name for Yiddish, used by Jews themselves who thought the language was essentially a bastardized German and therefore encouraged adoption of Hebrew, German, or Russian. Winchevsky’s clever rhyme of “zhargon” with “Smargon” refers to a town in contemporary Belarus; a Yiddish-speaking backwater. The reference, however, is either tongue-in-cheek, or prophetic: two of the greatest Yiddish poets, Moyshe Kulbak and Avrom Sutzkever, were in fact born in Smargon.

## „זשאַרגאַן“

דאָ שטייט אַ מאַן, וואָס הערט מיין ליד  
און שמייכלט צו דערבײַ;  
זײַן פנים זאָגט: ווי קומט אַ יוד  
צו פֿערזן־שרײַבערײַ?

ער מײנט, אַז דיכטן אין זשאַרגאַן  
איז הוילע פֿאַנטאַזיע.  
„ווי קומט דער לשון פֿון סמאַרגאַן  
– פֿרעגט ער – צו פֿאַעזיע?“

איך ענטפֿער אים: אַ מענטש קען זײַן  
אַ דיכטער אין זשאַרגאַן,  
פונקט ווי מען קען אין רײן לאַטיין  
אַ דומען שמייכל טאָן.

איך זאָג אים אויך, אַז איך אַליין  
האַב ליב די שפראַך דערפֿאַר,  
וואָס זי קען שווער אַ מאָל פֿאַרשטיין  
אַן אײַנגערעדטער נאַר...

## Tongue-Love

Yiddish and English by Michael Yashinsky

## Tongue-Love

THE JEW:

Through streets that can't be seen,  
I see you.  
From a world I've never been,  
I remember you.  
I am not irascible,  
Nor are you erasable,  
They say time is impassable,  
But I've found you.

Your thousand-year tongue  
Will taste fresh in my mouth,  
Pour your dark, fearless words in –  
Water our drought.  
Come whisper in my ear,  
Come kiss away your fear,  
Your wrinkled lips keep others out –  
Place them here.

THE JEW AND THE JEWISH LANGUAGE:

Let's go spreading  
This bedding  
On morphemes  
And utterance,  
Because it's hitting me like morphine:  
That we are each other's, us –

## לשון-ליבע

דער יוד:

אויף אומזעיקע גאָסן,  
איך זע דיר.  
פֿון אַ וועלט גאַנץ פֿאַרגעסן,  
געדענק דיר.  
איך בין שוין קיין בעסן,  
נאָר אויך ניט געלאָסן.  
פֿון צווישן די מאַסן,  
איך קלייב דיר.

מיטן לשון פֿון דורות,  
פֿאַריזווע מיך.  
טונקלער דיבור אָן מורא,  
אורעלטערלעך,  
קום רוים אין דעם אויער  
און האָב ניט קיין טרויער  
ז'דינן מויל אַ מויער?  
טאָ עפֿן זיך!

דער יוד און יודיש:

לאָמיר לייגן לעולם  
די פּלאַכטע  
פֿון ווערטער,  
ווייל איך האָב שוין אַ קליינינק  
פֿאַרדאַבטל,  
באַשערטער

That our dream is eternal  
And grand –  
That Tongue-Love is no  
One-night stand.

THE JEWISH LANGUAGE:

Come, come, sugar daddy  
Come plundering.  
Rip off your *shmutsik* and shabby  
Dumb underthings.  
It's clear I'm the best,  
And you've got it bad,  
And so I cry, "Yes lad!"  
Plumb under things.

Get your mind in the guttural,  
Go under.  
I've the hots for your mots,  
Though you blunder.  
True, I'm not flesh-and-bloodly,  
But I can feel when you rub me,  
Let your pen make a study  
Of my wonders.



Written in Amherst, Massachusetts, in July 2014, this poem was performed by the author at the "Yiddish Idol: Festival of Yiddish Song" competition in Mexico City in September, 2017. A love duet between a student of Yiddish and the Yiddish language, it plays on the dual meaning of *loshn* (tongue) in Yiddish as both a language and a part of the body, an instrument of communication and of love. It has been newly translated into English for this publication by the author, who writes: "I was glad to finally get the chance to do a free, poetic translation of the poem that matches the somewhat comically overheated, somewhat dirty, but hopefully ultimately sweet eroticism of the original".



אַז דער חלום איז אייביק  
און פראַכטפֿול,  
לשון-ליבע איז ניט קיין איינזאַכטל.

יִיִדיש:

קום, קום, ליבע-פֿעטער,  
פיקאַנטער,  
טו אויס דיין צעשמעטערטן  
שפּאַנצער.

איך בין גאָר די בעסטע  
נאָר דו האָסט דעם יצר,  
בכּן שריי איך „יעססער!“  
גאַלאַנטער.

דו רעדער, קום רעד מיך  
אַרונטער.  
דינע ליפּן מיך מאַכן  
הייס מונטער.  
כאַטש איך האָב ניט קיין לייב,  
קען איך פֿילן אַ רייב.  
מיט דיין פֿעדער קום שרייב  
מינע ווונדער.

## About the Poets and Translators

**Miranda Cooper**, an alumna of the Yiddish Book Center's Steiner Summer Yiddish Program and Fellowship, is an NYC-based writer and literary translator. Her literary and cultural criticism has been published by the *JTA*, *Tablet*, *Jewish Currents*, the Jewish Book Council, and *Alma*. Her Yiddish translations have appeared in *Pakn Treger* and the *Online Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*.



**Maia Evrona** is a poet, essayist, and memoirist. Her translations of Avrom Sutzkever from Yiddish into English were awarded a fellowship in translation from the National Endowment for the Arts, and have been widely published, along with her renderings of the poetry of Yoysef Kerler, Anna Margolin and others.



**Arkady Gendler** was born into poverty in Soroke, Romania around 1922. Gendler was a tailor, then a chemical engineer, and a lifelong Yiddish composer, singer, and folklore scholar. In the 1990s, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, he became a much-loved figure on the international klezmer circuit, performing right up until his death in 2017 at the age of 95.



**Jacob Glatstein (Yankev Glatshteyn)** is considered by many critics to be the preeminent Yiddish poet of the modern era. Born in 1896 in Lublin, Poland, he immigrated to the US in 1914, and died in New York in 1971. A towering figure in Yiddish intellectual life, he published many volumes of verse, and was influential as a critic and editor.

**Adah Hetko**, a current Yiddish Book Center Fellow, graduated from Indiana University with an M.A. in Jewish Studies in May 2018, writing her thesis on “Contemporary Yiddish Women Singers and their Development of Yiddish Identity.” Adah enjoys singing in Yiddish and writing new adaptations of Yiddish songs.



**Sophia Shoulson** is a 2018-2019 Yiddish Book Center Fellow and an alumna of the Yiddish Book Center’s Steiner Summer Yiddish Program. She is a recent graduate of Wesleyan University, where she wrote her senior thesis on early 20th-century Yiddish folklore studies.



**Morris Winchevsky** (1856-1932) was a renowned socialist activist, editor, poet and columnist in Hebrew, Yiddish and English. Born in what is now Jonava, Lithuania, he was jailed for his political beliefs, immigrated to London in 1879, and settled in New York in 1896. Many schools, political groups and Yiddish clubs around the world carried his name; the Morris Winchevsky Jewish School in Toronto, Canada, founded in 1928, is still going strong.



**Michael “Mikhl” Yashinsky** is an alumnus of several Yiddish Book Center educational programs, including the Fellowship program. He is a poet and playwright, Yiddish teacher and translator, and theater director and actor. He has recently performed in the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene’s productions of *Fiddler on the Roof* in Yiddish, and in *The Sorceress* (in the title role). He is currently the lecturer in Yiddish at the University of Michigan, his home state.

The quotation by Jacob Glatstein comes from his novel *Ven yash iz gekumen* (NY, 1940); the translation is by Richard Fein, from his introduction to *Selected Poems of Yankev Glatsteyn*, first published by The Jewish Publication Society in 1987. We are grateful to Richard Fein for permission to publish his translation of Glatstein's poem "My Tent" which first appeared in the same volume.

All the remaining translations in this booklet are published here for the first time. Copyright for each work is held by the translator.



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